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SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S MEDIA CRACKDOWN: NO END IN SIGHT

REF: (A) HANOI 672 (B) HCMC 700 (C) HANOI 865 AND PREVIOUS (D) 2007 HCMC 1136

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Four more chief editors of popular newspapers in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are expected to soon join the ranks of nine other press brethren who have been removed from their positions as a result of their reporting on corruption. Reliable Mission media contacts also lament that the end is nowhere in sight. Arrests could broaden as well since three of the senior editors whose press cards have already been revoked expect to be called in as co-defendants at the as-yet-unscheduled trial of the two Hanoi-based reporters who broke the news on the 2006 PMU 18 corruption scandal (Ref A). The heat appears to be coming directly from the Politburo, where rumors say that once opposing factions have now united and unanimously agreed that it is time to reign in the media for pushing the envelope on corruption reporting and public criticism of the government. The press firings appear to be part of a larger campaign to tighten the newspapers' fiscal freedom and outreach efforts. Journalists, though scared, are expressing their deep frustration in publicly available web logs (blogs). End Summary.

MORE HCMC EDITORS FACE FIRINGS

¶2. (SBU) ConGen's HCMC media contacts said they expect the current purge of top media brass to continue in coming days, while journalist contacts in Hanoi also confirm the spreading atmosphere of unease. Possible future firings include chief editor Le Hoang of Tuoi Tre (Youth), Nam Dong of the HCMC-based Phap Luat (the Law) newspaper and Ly Tien Dung of the Hanoi-based Dai Doan Ket (Great Unity) paper. All four are key players in Vietnamese media. Under Le Hoang, Tuoi Tre grew to become the nation's largest circulation daily, thanks largely due to its willingness to constantly push the envelope on press freedom in order to deliver real news that people want to read (ref D). Nam Dong, a scion in the press community who has been at the helm of Phap Luat for over ten years, ran into trouble when his daily published investigative reports on stock market manipulation by "underground bosses" connected to Party officials and their interest groups. Editor Dung is a potential target because of his paper's reporting on the arrest of the two Hanoi reporters who broke the PMU 18 corruption scandal.

¶3. (SBU) Following four days of "working sessions" with the HCMC authorities in late July, chief editor Le Hoang and the editorial board of Tuoi Tre were asked to voluntarily suggest forms of punishments for themselves. When the HCMC Communist Youth Union, which administers the paper, carried their suggestion of a "reprimand" -- the lightest disciplinary level -- to the Communist Party Secretariat, ConGen contacts say that the Party Secretariat scolded HCMC Youth Secretary General Vo Van Thuong for being "too submissive."

14. (SBU) Thanh Nien's chief editor Nguyen Cong Khe "will be next," according to a well-placed ConGen contact at the paper, but his removal will likely be done more quietly at year's end. Khe's case is special, since he is known as a well-connected political player with strong ties to both HCMC Party Secretary (and Politburo member) Hai and President Triet. While Thanh Nien (Youth) has developed strong pro-reform and anti-corruption credentials under Khe, detractors state that he has selectively revealed corruption and wrongdoings by certain government officials while scrupulously avoiding reporting on any scandal with possible links to those officials who make up his political "umbrella."

Khe also holds some international stature -- Thanh Nien was the organizer of the "Charming Vietnam" galas in Australia and the UK, the Vice President of the Vietnam-US Society, and was president of the Miss Universe organizing committee as well as the only Vietnamese judge. One contact close to Khe said he finds the ongoing press crackdown to be "incomprehensible" and speculated Khe may have lost his political backing in the Politburo. Other contacts, however, pointed out that Khe is well-known for his ability to lobby his way out of trouble, and may survive the current press purge despite a rumored "strong commitment" among the central government leaders to remove him.

TRIAL LOOMS AHEAD

15. (SBU) These rumors come in the wake of a wave of firings and official press card revocations by the Ministry of Information and Communication in Hanoi. At Tuoi Tre, those who have already fallen victim to the press crackdown include Deputy Editor-in-Chief Bui Van Thanh (Ref B) and the paper's Hanoi Office Manager Duong Duc Da Trang. At Thanh Nien, Deputy Editor-in-Chief Nguyen Quoc Phong and General Manager Huynh Kim Sanh were among those who were fired and had their press cards revoked on August 1. The official reason the Ministry gave for the dismissals were alleged "violations of professional operations." While no official charges have yet been announced,

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three former editors from Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien may face charges at the as-yet-unscheduled trial of the two Hanoi reporters who broke the news on the PMU 18 scandal. One senior editor told ConGen that he believes he has a "fifty-fifty" chance of facing prosecution and additional penalties.

16. (SBU) Ministry of Public Security (MPS) Senior Colonel Nao Tam Chau acknowledged to Hanoi Poloff that the charges against the reporters who broke the PMU 18 story had created the impression among many people that the government's action was politically motivated retaliation for their exposure of corruption; Chau said even he had this impression when he first heard of the arrests. He asserted, however, that having seen the evidence against the reporters he believed their trial would expose their wrongdoing and convince people that they had indeed acted improperly. Various contacts in HCMC have echoed a very similar line, maintaining that the latest information they have indicates that the two reporters purposefully reported false information. It appears, however, that these statements do not mean that the GVN and CPV believe that the entire PMU18 scandal was fabricated. On August 13, the Communist Party Secretariat asked the GVN to sack Deputy Minister of Transport Nguyen Viet Tien for "previous irresponsibility which caused dire consequences for...PMU 18." Since Tien was acquitted of criminal charges earlier this year, this development adds another quixotic twist to this tale of official corruption.

GVN MOVES TO LIMIT PRESS OUTREACH

17. (SBU) A well-placed press contact said the Party's Politburo reached an unanimous decision in March to "rectify" the media, and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, together with Standing member of the Secretariat Truong Tan Sang, pushed strongly for it. Media contacts at Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien said GVN authorities carried out a comprehensive audit of the papers' financial records in late June, including social work and scholarship programs. While these audits are routine, ConGen

contacts noted that they can be used as fault-finding missions to gather evidence for potential personnel actions. Following the audits, GVN authorities have now begun to implement Decree 64 and Ministry of Finance Circular 72, which prevent all newspapers from directly engaging in charitable activities, including disaster relief aid. According to the new regulations, newspapers can still accept charitable donations but have to forward them to the Fatherland Front for distribution. This move was widely seen as another way to clamp down on the independence and influence of the media.

JOURNALISTS SCARED BUT NOT SILENCED

18. (SBU) While journalists have been reluctant to meet with ConGen officially during these uncertain times of increased surveillance and police questioning, reporters are continuing to blast the GVN's "rectification" campaign against the media in their weblogs. One August 11 blog entry argued that the crackdown has not only harmed the "people's trust in the Party and its willingness to fight corruption," but also undermined the "people's right to freedom of speech." The entry also attributed the Party officials' mindset to a "lack of democracy." Six international affairs reporters met with Embassy officials for an off the record discussion of the current environment on August 12, noting their growing unease but affirming their and their colleagues' commitment to the profession. As one editor noted, they must be cautious not to cross certain lines that the government lays down -- a particularly challenging task when the seems to be moving backwards.

MEDIA CRACKDOWN TIMELINE

19. (SBU) The following is a list of journalists and editors who have faced official reprisals since May. All cases appear related to reporting on corruption, including the PMU 18 scandal.

Arrested:

--Nguyen Viet Chien, Thanh Nien reporter
--Nguyen Van Hai, Tuoi Tre reporter

Dismissed:

--Huynh Son Phuoc, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Tuoi Tre
--Nguyen Quang Vinh, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Tuoi Tre

Dismissed, with press cards revoked:

--Nguyen Quoc Phong, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Thanh Nien
--Huynh Kim Sanh, General Manager of Thanh Nien

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--Bui Van Thanh, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Tuoi Tre
--Duong Duc Da Trang, Hanoi Office Manager of Tuoi Tre

Reprimanded:

--Nguyen Quang Thong, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Thanh Nien

Comment:

110. (SBU) Despite the optimism expressed by the Ministry of Public Security, it seems unlikely the trials of the jailed reporters will convince average Vietnamese that the charges they face are the result of anything other than a systematic crackdown on media freedom. This ongoing crackdown has created a climate of fear and uncertainty in the media community. Some journalists are contemplating resigning from the business while others worry that popular papers may fold under the pressure. All feel the worst is yet to come as they await news of trial dates for the two jailed reporters in Hanoi and other possible prosecutions. Regardless of whether the GVN replaces these leading lights with Party hacks, as many expect, the arrests of reporters and sacking of some of the most experienced and

pro-reform media professionals in Vietnam certainly represents a serious setback to freedom of the press and freedom of speech in Vietnam. End comment.

11. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.FAIRFAX